

Business & Practice

Leadership Council on Legal Diversity Calls for Personal Pledges

By Ruiqi Chen

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- “Leaders at the Front” asks for personal commitments to diversity
 - Legal leaders from Walt Disney, HP Inc., Crowell & Moring make pledges
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The Leadership Council on Legal Diversity is putting a personal spin on industry diversity commitments by inviting its more than 300 members, who are leaders of law firms and corporate legal departments, to publicly pledge to meet diversity and inclusion goals.

“Leaders at the Front” launched on Oct. 22 but was first conceptualized three years ago according to LCLD president Robert Grey. It was created following a LCLD survey that underscored the barriers facing diverse attorneys looking to advance.

The new program emphasizes cultivating diverse future leadership in the legal industry, which has long had problems retaining and promoting women and minorities.

Pledges from individual members include a personal commitment to improving diversity, an organizational commitment, and a set of metrics that can be used to evaluate each plan on an annual basis.

“We want to move beyond talking to acting to effect change for our diverse talent. That is the mission here,” said Ellen Dwyer, the chair of LCLD’s board of directors and a partner and chair of the executive committee at Crowell & Moring.

As of Thursday morning, there were 15 pledges online from leaders at companies like The Walt Disney Co. and HP Inc., as well as law firms such as Crowell, Skadden, and Orrick. Grey said he hopes that most, if not all, of LCLD’s members will make pledges of their own.

Most of the pledges include commitments to mentor or sponsor diverse lawyers at their organizations. Dwyer’s own personal pledge includes a promise to sponsor two Black lawyers through 2021 to position them for career advancement and to visit eight or more clients and LCLD members to discuss diversity commitments per year.

Kim Rivera, president of strategy and business management and chief legal officer at HP Inc., said in her pledge she will host and engage at least 15 other general counsel in promoting diversity through 2021 and use her network to advance systemic change. Rivera is chair elect of the LCLD's board.

Sponsorship Needs

The idea for "Leaders at the Front" had been brewing for some time, but the council's recent survey was the final push that launched the initiative.

"The board of LCLD and the leaders that make up the board had decided before the health crisis and social justice crisis that more needed to be done in an intentional way to improve the culture of our organizations for these talented individuals that we have been working with to really succeed in their own organizations," said Grey.

The survey included the responses of 178 diverse lawyers—20% of whom identified as white and 73% as female—who had participated in LCLD programs. The survey was conducted earlier in 2020 by consultancy Coqual. Bloomberg L.P. is a co-chair of Coqual's task force, and Bloomberg Industry Group is an affiliate of Bloomberg L.P.

Among these diverse attorneys, though 78% of men and 78% of women said they want to be leaders in their organizations, only 67% of men and 53% of women believed they could get there.

When broken down by race, more white lawyers, 65%, believed they could become leaders than minority lawyers did. Only 53% of Black and 53% Asian lawyers thought they'd get to the leadership ranks.

Dwyer said that people within organizations tend to "sponsor" those who look like themselves, resulting in more upward mobility for white men because there are fewer women and people of color in leadership roles in the legal field.

The survey also found differences in how diverse in-house lawyers and private practice attorneys perceived their career mobility.

While 57% of law firm attorneys surveyed considered their senior leadership to be inclusive, only 41% of in-house lawyers felt the same way. Similarly, nearly 60% of law firm attorneys reported they were satisfied with their rates of advancement, compared to 34% of their in-house counterparts, despite diversity initiatives launched by in-house departments in recent years.

Dwyer said these numbers might be explained by the different management structures that exist between law firms and corporate legal departments. While there is typically only one general counsel at a company, a private law firm could have hundreds of partners, providing more room for advancement.

To contact the reporter on this story: Ruiqi Chen in Washington, D.C. at rchen@bloombergindustry.com

To contact the editors responsible for this story: Rebekah Mintzer at rmintzer@bloomberglaw.com; Chris Opfer at copfer@bloomberglaw.com

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